

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

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TRANSPLANTED WHOOPING CRANE DIES AFTER HITTING FENCE

A juvenile whooping crane, hatched by foster sandhill crane parents and raised successfully for almost five months, died Sunday from injuries received when it flew into a rancher's wire fence in Colorado's San Luis Valley.

The whooper was one of four which hatched from eggs transplanted into nests of sandhill cranes in a joint U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service-Canadian Wildlife Service project to establish a second wild flock of the endangered birds. The eggs were taken from the whoopers' nesting grounds in northern Canada and placed in nests of sandhills at Gray's Lake National Wildlife Refuge in Idaho. Four other whoopers were raised in the project last year.

The 4-1/2 foot bird weighed 11 pounds and had a wing span of more than 7 feet. It was the largest, most robust and appeared the healthiest of the birds hatched this spring. It had migrated October 5 to the Monte Vista National Wildlife Refuge in Colorado--300 miles from Gray's Lake. Monte Vista is in the midst of the San Luis Valley--a favorite resting stop for migrating sandhills.

The incident occurred as the whooper and its foster parents were moving out of the refuge to feed. Refuge personnel, who had been watching the family since its arrival, observed the whooper fly over one 4-1/2 foot wire fence bordering the refuge and skim along the brush just off the ground. Then it smacked into another wire fence about 4 feet high on

(over)

private property about 70 feet from the refuge. The fence was evidently obscured from the bird's view because it blended with sagebrush and other vegetation in the background.

As one of only 58 wild whoopers in existence, the bird was watched closely for several days from a distance, and was flown to a veterinarian at Colorado Springs after showing signs of distress. It died several hours later. The veterinarian reported that although the bird had no broken bones, its wounds had become so infected that there was no circulation in its left leg.

"The area where the whoopers were transplanted to is agricultural and ranching country with many fences," said Keith Schreiner, Associate Director of the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "We've removed as many unnecessary ones on refuges as we can. But the entire whooping crane transplant experiment is based on the premise that the birds must learn to survive in a modern world. And fences are a fact of life. This is one of the hazards you have in trying to raise whoopers."

Sandhill and whooping cranes are notorious for running into power and telephone lines. In fact, these obstacles are the major cause of mortality among birds found dead--even though the total number is still very small.

The dead whooper is being autopsied and its skin will be mounted for scientific use. Its death means that seven whooping cranes remain which were produced from the transplant project.

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